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By LAUREN WARNECKE

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Dance Chicagoans of the Year are the creative team from Ensemble Español: Irma Suárez Ruiz, artistic director, and Jorge Pérez, executive and associate artistic director, here at their "home" auditorium at Northeastern Illinois University.

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Dame Libby Komaiko found Spanish dance by happenstance, [auditioning for José Greco](#) on a whim in the 1960s. The Evanstonian wasn't Spanish, yet she paved the way for one of the world's best Spanish dance organizations: Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater.

Komaiko founded the company in 1975, and groomed current executive director Jorge Perez and artistic director Irma Suárez Ruiz as the next generation of leaders for the ensemble. Perez and Ruiz have been at the helm for several years, but Komaiko remained a trusted mentor and advisor until the final days of her life. [At age 69, she died Feb. 2, 2019](#) of pneumonia.

Losing the founder removes the north star of any dance company, yet even as company members grieve, Ensemble Español appears stronger than ever. Indeed, it was a season that yielded seven world premieres, extraordinary concerts in Skokie, St. Louis, [at the Auditorium Theatre](#), and at Northeastern Illinois University, where the company has been in residence since the beginning. World-renowned dancer/choreographer José Barrios spent four weeks as a guest artist, conducting classes, workshops, and making new choreographies. And the formation of the Dame Libby Komaiko Legacy Fund edges the company closer to a major goal: providing full-time salaries and benefits for all the dancers.



Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater performs "Pasion Oculta" by Irma Suarez Ruiz at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago in October. (Dean Paul photo)

“All we wanted to do was dance,” says Ruiz, who saw a concert at Northeastern 40 years ago and has been with the company ever since. Komaiko, Ruiz and Perez —who met Komaiko in 1985 when he got an on-campus job in her office — might have stumbled across this dance form, but the company didn’t reach this level of success by accident. “When I wake up, my first thought is coming to work and trying to make the best of my day,” says Ruiz. “We live Ensemble.”

The unceasing drive and harnessed passion Ruiz and Perez bring to their jobs have catalyzed Ensemble Español to become a major player in Chicago’s concert dance scene. And the company is unique in its dedication to preserving not just flamenco, but the full spectrum of Spanish dance styles, including classical, folkloric and contemporary dance, as well as flamenco. During their 40th anniversary season, a tour to Spain affirmed this mission when the National Ballet of Spain endorsed the company for its efforts to preserve and promote the art form.

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What makes Chicago an apt international hub for Spanish dance? “Why not?” said Ruiz. “Thank goodness José Greco made that stop at the Palmer House,” Perez said. “With Chicago’s cultural richness, we can see how they embraced the Ensemble and Dame Libby’s work early on,” adding that an important key to their success has been the ongoing partnership with Northeastern, and the university’s unique Spanish dance-focused curriculum.





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“Being side-by-side with Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, the Joffrey Ballet and Giordano Dance Chicago, the vision for that to happen is what we’re shooting for right now,” says Perez. “The caliber of work is there, the production value is there, we have an audience following. ... We definitely don’t want this to be the best kept secret. It’s no longer about how we do the work, but how do we share the work?”

*For the 2019 Chicagoans of the Year, the Tribune asked each recipient the following questions about the decade of arts in Chicago:*

**Q: Looking back over the last decade, what do you think was the most important event that impacted the Chicago arts scene?**

A: “We lost the Chicago Dancing Festival,” says Perez. “That was huge. What fills that void? Stomping Grounds continues to grow and show the city that way, including so many amazing organizations that we look up to and admire for their work: Muntu Dance Theater, the Mexican Folkloric Dance Company, Trinity Irish Dance, Chicago Human Rhythm Project and Natya Dance Theatre.”

**Q: Looking ahead to 2020, what is the most critical issue that needs to be addressed for Chicago arts and what person or institutions are best equipped now to have an impact on this issue?**

A: “Artists need the financial support to be seen in the light of these amazing theaters we have right in our own backyard, and to do more outreach work which helps to sustain the art form,” says Perez. “You don’t want to say that it boils down to money, but artists need to get paid.”

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